

Vermont's congressional delegation and the U.S. Department of Transportation announced Wednesday the release of \$50 million in federal stimulus money for upgrades to the Amtrak passenger track from St. Albans to Vernon.

Recently approved by the Federal Railroad Administration, the improvements to the 190-mile stretch will allow trains to decrease travel time by roughly an hour through Vermont and Massachusetts in the country's single largest rail improvement project. The infrastructure investment will also create numerous construction jobs and revamp the railroad for both freight and passenger trains in the long-term.

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., said improvements to Amtrak's Vermonter (running from St. Albans through Brattleboro's station to Washington, D.C.) will help Windham County businesses and commuters while boosting the region's growing tourism economy.

"This investment in high-speed rail will create good jobs and support Windham County's environment commitment," he said. "With the release of these funds, the [American Reinvestment and Recovery Act] is putting Vermonters to work and laying the groundwork for the future of Vermont's transportation infrastructure. The speed with which this project is moving forward is a testament to Vermonters' support for the many benefits of high-speed rail: commuting convenience, business development and environmentally friendly travel."

The high-speed rail grant was awarded under the High-Speed Intercity Passenger Rail (HSIPR) program and is the second project to break ground nationally using Congress-approved stimulus funds. Maine's Downeaster line was the first earlier this year.

"This is the biggest single investment in passenger rail improvements we have had in Vermont since Amtrak was created. We have long sought these improvements, which are just the ticket for a shorter and smoother ride on the Vermonter," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., in a statement. "This is a solid investment in our future and a vote of confidence in passenger rail service in Vermont."

The federal funding is good news for the Vermont Rail Action Network.

In a release from its executive director Christopher Parker, the network said the train is valuable to Vermont's economy and environment, however it must remain competitive. "Not only does that benefit Vermonters, but it brings us the economic benefit of making it easier for folks from points south to come visit us."

During a July meeting in Hartford, Conn., transportation officials from Connecticut, Massachusetts and Vermont reviewed a 20-year proposal to renovate more than 500 miles of track throughout New England. Within the plans, agencies from the three states hoped to increase the frequency of the stops, as well as the speed between the stations while unclogging some of the region's congested highways.

Along with Vermont's \$50 million, Connecticut received \$40 million to add a second track (and chipped in more than \$200 state funds for the project) and Massachusetts received \$70 million to upgrade the deteriorating Connecticut River railroad.

Officials hope the efforts to coordinate an improved rail network to connect major cities (along with Bradley International Airport in Windsor Locks, Conn.) will double passenger ridership in the next 20 years.

The Vermonter line has already jumped by more than 40 percent this summer. Figures from the national transportation department project approximately 80,000 people traveled on the Vermonter last year and the service is showing a 16 percent ridership increase in 2010.

"The number of passengers riding the Vermonter has been growing steadily," said Gov. James Douglas.

"This project will put people to work constructing the improvements necessary to shorten the length of time it takes the train to travel through the state, which in turn will make our Amtrak service an even more attractive option for busy travelers," Douglas added.

"Another reason ridership is up is that on-time performance in the last few years has been excellent, thanks to the good performance of the New England Central Railroad, over which the train runs for much of its route," Parker said in the release. "There is one thing lacking now -- a connection to Montreal. The logic of that is obvious when looking at a map of the Vermonter's route, which ends just south of the border in St. Albans -- stopping short of serving the 5 million Quebecers who could use it to come to Vermont."

In fact, the Vermonter line was once known as the "Montrealer" and made frequent daily arrivals and departures from the Canadian metropolis.

The improvements to install continuously welded rail, new crossties and updated safety equipment will set the stage for extending the service back to Quebec. Vermont's federal delegation has supported funding for such a service, as well as a \$60 million proposal for a corridor track from Bennington to Burlington.